10: d'Orleans--348 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 532, 527, 773, 796

[LSS: During the New Year celebration in Luang Prabang.]

"The dances begin, and two men emerge from the pagoda enveloped in vast cloaks coming down to their heels which are meant to designate the skin of some wild animal, while they have on their heads a mask of black wood representing some monster with enormous eyes, large mouth with very sharp teeth, very long ears and a lower jaw which can be moved at will. Behind the head is a long mane of coarse hair, and we are told that they are known as Pi Konge, or devils with a cruel face, while the old bonze says that they are the chiefs of the tigers, or the Pi Sua (race of devils). The Siamese Colonel adds that in the Laos they are known as Pou Yen (from Pou, father) or Ya Yen (from Ya, mother), and there is a legend that men of this kind once lived in a large forest, and that though they inspired great terror two of them were captured, these monsters representing the captive pair. It is interesting to compare this native tradition with the assertion of several travellers that the Laos was formerly inhabited by a hairy race of men."

Thaïs of the Mékong The genesis of Thaï settlement in the valley of the Mékong is infinitely more obscure. There is a complete lack of documentary evidence if we overlook the Laotian legends which are indeed charming in their animation and naïveté but which do not offer any guarantee of authenticity or even, in most cases, of probability (2). We must nevertheless admit that 174 773

2. Cf. Mission Pavie, Études diverses, Vol. II, "Recherches sur l'Histoire du Cambodge du Laos et du Siam" (manuscripts translated by Auguste Pavie's Cambodians).

the wonderful tales of Muong-Theng's gourd and of the division of the earth between the sons of Khoun-Borom do not contradict our notions as to the expansion of the Thaï race in Indo-China, and that they constitute an obvious allusion to the arrival of the invaders in eastern Laos.

Here is the legend, of which there are several versions, in as "denuded" and condensed a form as possible (3): 539 174 773

3. This legend of the gourds very probably takes its inspiration from the passage in the Ramayana which tells how "Loumati, the second wife of Sagara, gave birth to a green calabash. It broke, and sixty thousand sons came out of it. The nurses put this 'little' family out to grow in a bed of butter." (Ibid., Introduction, p. xxxvii.)

/31/ The king of Heaven Phya-Theng sent the sage Khoun-Borom to reign on earth with two divine wives, Nang-Et-Keng and Nang-Yoma-kara. Mounted on a white elephant with black ears and tusks which were curved, transparent and crossed, Khoun-Borom came down to the vast plateau of Muong-Theng (the land of angels, known today by the Annamite name Dien-Bien-Phu) in the spot called Na-Noï. There a gourd plant of prodigious dimensions had grown in the center of Kouva pond and had fastened onto a fig tree on the bank which was itself of unrivaled size and which helped the plant to support two enormous fruits. The celestial envoy had the gourds pierced, and out of them, in incalculable quantities, there at once came gold, silver, cloth, perfume, plant seeds, men, women, oxen, buffalo, pigs, dogs, chickens, ducks, etc., which spread throughout the world. And since his two wives had given him seven sons, Khoun-Borom

539. separated the peoples and divided them among his sons:
174 1. Khoun-Lo received Muong-Swa, the land of millions of ele-
● 773 phants and of white parasols (Lan-Xang-Hom-Khao);

2. Chet-Chuong received Muong-Phoueun (plateau of Tran-Ninh and valley of the Nam-Nhiep as far as the vicinity of Borikane);

/32/ 3. Nhi-Fa-Lane received Muong-Ho (Sip-Song-Panas, the land of the Twelve Thousand Ricefields);

4. Chu-Song received Prakan (the Thai regions of Upper Tonkin and of the Black River);

5. Saya-Phong received Muong-Nioun (Xieng-Mai or Lan-Na, the land of millions of ricefields);

6. Kham-In received Muong-Louvo (Siam or Lan-Piyea, the land of millions of granaries);

7. Louk-Poun, finally, received Hongsavadi (Pegou and Pagan).

Before sending them forth Khoun-Borom said to the seven kings who were his children: "You shall live peacefully and as good neighbors, the elder ones not quarreling with their younger brothers... Go forth, and remember that you were born of the same womb."

174 It is not impossible that this division, in spite of its fabulous
631 character, should mark the first stage of the history of the Thaïs in the Mékong valley, at a time which the legend does not indicate but which might belong to the second half of the thirteenth century. This date would indeed correspond approximately to an inscription of Rama-Khameng, king of Sukhothaï, "written in Cambodian characters on the four sides of a sandstone stele" and translated by Father Schmitt, in which are mentioned for the first time the names of Vientiane and Vien-Kham (Tran-Ninh) in /33/ the basin of the "Khong river" (1). But whereas the Thaïs of the Ménam had succeeded, in the course of relatively brief stages, in forming a compact Siamese kingdom which was rapidly freed from Kmer domination, the Thaïs of the Mékong remained divided for a much longer time.

1. Cf. Mission Pavie, ibid. /Études diverses, Vol II, "Recherches sur l'Histoire du Cambodge du Laos et du Siam" (manuscripts translated by Auguste Pavie's Cambodians)/, pp. 175ff., and G. Maspero, "Le Royaume de Vieng-Chan" (Revue indochinoise, 1904, pp. 497 and 498).

Having probably come from their land of origin through the secondary valleys of the Nam-Ta, the Nam Ou and the Nam-Ngun, they founded more or less rival principalities: Cri Cudhamanagari (Muong-Swa-Luang-Prabang); Muong Phoueun (Xieng-Kham, later

796 Pha Vet is the Laotian name of the Vessantara Jataka which is
773 the story of the last former life of the Buddha.

"Prince Vessantara, a pious Buddhist, gave many alms. In his kingdom lived a white elephant who had the power to make rain fall at will. A Brahman from a neighboring country asked him for this elephant. The charitable prince made him a present of it. The people, who were displeased, went to find the king and ask him to exile the prince. The latter was sent into the forest with his family, but on his way to his rustic hermitage he met various people who begged alms of him. He gave away successively his wagon, his horses, his children. Finally he made a gift of his wife to the god Indra who, disguised as an ascetic, had [37] asked him for her in order to prove his generosity. Then Indra gave him back his wife, while the children were returned to the king their grandfather by a brahman. With the help of his grandson, the king was able to find the prince and his wife and bring them back to the kingdom where everything came to a happy ending. After his death Prince Vessantara became a Buddha."

It should be noted in connection with this story that, according to the Chinese pilgrim Hiuan-Tsang who visited India in the seventh century of our era, the town of Po-Lou-Cha (at the present day Shahbaz Garhi, a few tens of kilometers northeast of Peshawar) became in its time the place where the framework of Vessantara Jataka was supposed to be. Numerous Graeco-Buddhist bas-reliefs illustrating this legend have been discovered there.

796 Vixakha Bouxa--Feast of the Sixth Month.

On the fifteenth day of the crescent moon, the date of the birth, illumination and death of Buddha is celebrated. The series of legends purposing to explain this feast show its complexity. A thorough study is being made at the present time in order to determine its origin and true meaning. In the present state of the question, we will limit ourselves with all reservation to giving the different explanations which we have found in the manuscripts.

We are in the presence of a typical example of a feast of profane nature which the Buddhist tradition is attempting for better or worse to assimilate. According to the Laotian Buddhists, the rockets sent off during this feast are destined to light the funeral pyre which will consume the Buddha's bier. To be precise, no Buddhist text mentions this rite, and the Hit Sip Song Khong Sip Si makes no allusion to this ceremony.

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The different reasons for this feast must therefore be sought. First of all, it takes place at the end of [38] the dry season. It is the last rejoicing before the heavy work of the rice fields. Furthermore, its purpose is well determined, for it is intended to bring on the rains and to assure the fertility of the soil.

The principal element of this manifestation is the rocket. This is a long decorated bamboo which is supposed to represent the body of a Naga, one of its extremities being adorned with a Naga head. As for the multi-colored streamer hanging beneath, it symbolizes the rainbow. This theme, which is also found in Indochina, deserves to be studied in Laos before any comparison can be made. A passage of the history of Thao Kathanam gives us the reason for throwing up rockets in order to obtain rain:

"... the day Thao Kathanam was married to the daughter of the King of Champa there was a great feast. From the summit of Mount Gijjakuta, the Yaksa, Gandharva and Phi launched rockets to celebrate the event. For three days all the rockets rose to the sky where they reached the world of the Catulokapala (the four guardians of the world). The Then (genii) thought that the inhabitants of the earth were throwing fire in order to burn the muong Then. They were troubled by this and went to seek protection from the god Indra. Indra then instigated storms, rain and a devastating wind to destroy these balls of fire. The remains of the rockets fell to earth, caught on the trees and became parasitic plants. Since then, in order to obtain rain, rockets are launched towards the sky to frighten the Then."

But the throwing of rockets is also a competition, and the owner of the rocket which goes furthest is sure of a prosperous year. The Legend of Thao Phadeng and of Nang Ay of the country of the Nagas gives us the origin of this competition.

[39] "The son of the king of the Nagas was the rival of Thao Phadeng for the hand of Nang Ay. The father of Nang Ay did not know to whom to give his daughter, so he advised the two suitors to make some rockets. The one who would launch his rocket the furthest would become the husband of Nang Ay. Thao Phadeng won, but the son of the king of the Nagas would not accept his defeat and decided to obtain Nang Ay dead or alive." Then begins an amazing story in which there is no further question of rockets, and no element which might furnish an explanation.

In this way, the rain brought about by this hurling and competition of rockets will ensure a good harvest. Also to this first ceremony there is grafted a second which is the feast of fecundity.

796 1. To have had carnal relations with anyone, even an animal.
2. To have stolen the property of others.
3. To have killed.
792 4. To have falsely usurped spiritual perfections, and with the intention of personal profit.

783 Then follows a list of lesser sins. When the enumeration is completed, the reader addresses the monks, repeating three times the following question:

"Now, I ask the reverend ones: Are you free of these sins? And for the second time: Are you pure? And for the third time I ask: Are you pure?" If everyone is silent, the reader says: "The reverend Ones are free of these sins, therefore they are silent, that is how I understand it."

In this way are catalogued in more than two hundred paragraphs, without much order, the precepts dealing with the daily life of the monks, their housing, their food and drink. No detail however irrelevant or insignificant is omitted.

In Laos as in Cambodia "during the entire rainy season, a taper of the Vassa must burn in each pagoda. This consists of a more or less richly carved, painted, wooden cylinder into which is poured virgin wax around a wick" (E. Porée-Maspéro). Before going into retreat, the bonzes are given garments, then the people form a procession and enter the pagodas where they deposit their taper.

196 [43] Ho Khao Padap Dinh--the Feast of the Dead of the Ninth Month

• 773 This feast is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the waning moon of the ninth month and is accompanied by offerings to the bonzes.

735 A Jataka (Sadhitissaraja) taken from the Ha Sip Xat tells us the benefits acquired by celebrating this feast.

"Two poor devout Buddhist woodcutters sold the produce of their labor and bought two large urns. Into them they put some rice, a few pieces of sugar cane, two bowls, four bananas, some meat and fish, and some delicacies. They offered all this to a bonze on the day of the feast of the dead and vowed to be born again in a better state. As a result of this act of charity they were born again into a royal family. The husband became king and his wife queen. The Buddha then said to those who were listening to this story: "When an act of charity is done for the feast of the dead, one attains three blisses: the terrestrial bliss of being king, the celestial bliss of becoming Indra and finally the supreme bliss of Nirvana."

Ho Khao Slak--The Feast of the Tenth Month. 796 735

This feast is similar to that taking place in Cambodia at the same period. Offerings are made to the bonzes by casting lots. The name of the bonze is written on small tickets which are mixed up in a cup. Each donor offers his present to the monk whose name he has drawn.

The Feasts of the Eleventh Month. 792

The Buddhist Lent finishes on the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the eleventh month. In each pagoda the bonzes recite the Patimokkha, then confess their sins before leaving the [44] community to go either on a pilgrimage or into a rustic retreat for the period of the dry season. 796

The Offering of Kanthin. During this feast the ceremony of Kanthin takes place. This consists in offering to the bonzes garments, bedding, etc.... 796 735

"When the Buddha was in the Jetavana at Savatthi, some monks came to find him. They were caught by the beginning of Lent and were obliged to stop on their way. When they set out again after the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the eleventh month, they arrived covered with mud. The Buddha therefore authorized them to accept the gift of garments at the end of Lent." [773]

The Kanthin can only be accepted by a group of at least five bonzes, but the material may not be borrowed of a third or offered on demand. Those who receive a Kanthin must sew its pieces themselves. (Cf. the Laotian bonze).

The Feast of the Waters. 796 773

Other feasts correspond to these purely Buddhist ones. The day before the race of the dugouts the faithful throw into the river small illuminated boats of bamboo or banana wood. Originally lamps were used, consisting of a piece of string dipped in oil, and held up by a banana leaf. This cord was woven at one end in the shape of crows' feet, in memory of the Jataka of the "White Crow."

"A female crow had made its nest at the top of a tree. On the night of a storm the bird died, and its five eggs were carried away by the current. They were gathered by five animals, a hen, an otter, a turtle, a cow, a serpent and gave birth to five buddhas. These buddhas often thought [45] of their mother who was in the heaven of the Tavatimca. She came down to earth in the form of

796 a hermit and said to them: "If you think of your mother, build little
773 illuminated boats and let them be carried away by the current on the *fifteenth day of the eleventh month.*"

This rite is common to all the Asiatic countries of the monsoon. It is found in Lower Burma where it is said to celebrate the victory of the monk Oupagoutta over Mara. It is also practised in Cambodia, southern China at Amoy, in Borneo and in Japan.

Actually we are dealing with what Sir J. Frazer called the expulsion of the emissary he-goat. "These little rafts loaded with offerings attracted the evil genii who had been in contact with the living during the rains. They are driven away on board these frail skiffs." The expulsion of the emissary goat is often accompanied by licentious scenes similar to those of ancient Saturnalia and Bacchanalia.

[526] The race of the dugouts was originally intended to bring about the fall of the waters, but apparently it seems that in Vientiane, in spite of offerings made to the Nagas of the Nam Passak, the original idea has been lost, and the dugout race has become simply a sporting event.

796 The Feasts of the Twelfth Month.
1643 When King Asoka had completed the 84,000 shrines which he had built to contain the ashes of the Buddha, he made a great feast of the That on the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the twelfth month. The feasts of the That Luang are celebrated in memory of this pious deed.

At Vientiane they are preceded by the feast of Vat Si Muong and conclude with those of the Vat Ong Tu [46] and Impeng (see appendix: Vientiane). They always involve the same ceremonial, circumambulation around the pagoda with small sticks of wax and incense, offerings to the bonzes, etc....

The day before the feast of That Luang, on the fourteenth day of the crescent moon, the Great Oath takes place. The king goes to the pagoda of Vat Ong Tu. All the high dignitaries and principal office-holders of the kingdom are present. The bonzes chant the ritual prayers. Two Kha guards in red tunics and green sampots, red berets with a pompon on their heads similar to the headdress worn by warriors represented at the Bayon of Angkor Thom, plunge the points of the sabres, guns and lances into four begging bowls containing lustral water. The master of ceremonies recites the oath written on palm leaves three times. Then the water in which the weapons have been dipped is distributed to the principal dignitaries who drink it.

527 805 the course of the year for good or for bad. On the day of the New Year, a bassi is offered to His Majesty the King by the ministers and high dignitaries. Then a delegation of bonzes is admitted to the palace where, after receiving the ritual offerings, they are sprinkled in a cabin by His Majesty the King and members of the royal family.

Outside in the town the aspersions continue more than ever during [643] the whole week. During these feasts the King goes in a dugout to the grottoes of Xieng Men, opposite Luang Prabang, and to those of Pak Ou where he sprinkles the statues there. Then he comes to make the ritual aspersion of the Phra Bang, palladium of the kingdom, at the pagoda of Vat May.

527 773 During these feasts of the New Year, the dance of the Phou Gneu Gna Gneu takes place. These are legendary individuals considered the ancestors of the Laotians, whose story is as follows:

When Phou Lan Xong had pierced the gourd, the king of heaven sent his son Khoum Bolom to organize the country. While he was performing the mission entrusted to him by his father, a vine was seen to rise from the earth. It grew rapidly and soon covered the whole world with its shadow. Men ceased to see the sky and were deprived of light and heat. The king ordered this monstrous vine to be cut down, but nobody dared to risk doing this. Finally an aged couple [deux vieux époux] Phou Thao Gneu and Me Ngam, armed with a hatchet and preceding the son of heaven, come down to earth, announced that they were willing to undertake this perilous task. But they stipulated that after their death they would receive offerings and would be invoked at the beginning of meals and other business. Everybody [67] agreed to this. Then they attacked the vine with blows of the hatchet. At the end of three months and three days, the vine fell and crushed them in its fall, but the sun shone again on the world.

The agreement has been kept. Since that day the dance of the Phou Gneu Gna Gneu is one of the principal elements of the Laotian feast of the New Year.

527 825 The two dancers wear enormous cardboard masks. They listen on their knees to prayers read aloud to them, while alongside of them a lion waves its paws nonchalantly. This lion has rather a peculiar role. Apparently it is another survival of the legend of the cycle of animals. Not having any toys to give their children, the first ancestors had the idea of modeling one year a rat, another year an ox, then a tiger, a hare, a dragon, etc. The name of each animal designated the year during which it was used as a toy. Finally these little figures became alive and became the ancestors of the present day species. At

the present time only the lion is kept, for apparently its role is no longer very well known. 527 825

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THE HARVEST FESTIVAL

This takes place after the harvest, during the first and second months, and is held in the open countryside. Its purpose is to glorify "the soul of rice." 527 243

It is not until the threshing has been completed and the rice piled up in heaps that the master of the harvest consults his neighbors and chooses with them the day of celebration. Light shelters must then be built on his field around the threshing area to accommodate the guests. On the top of the pile of paddy a sort of pulpit is erected from which the bonzes will recite their prayers.

On the morning of the feast day, the master of the house slaughters an ox from which is made the traditional lap, a dish consisting of raw meat and chopped up peppers mixed with various chopped up green vegetables the whole held together with a soup of pa dek. In the evening a court of love is held and the mo lam (professional singers) are also invited. At the end of this first night, the bonzes climb into the pulpit before daybreak to read the legend of Nang Kho Sop. [262] 527 773

"In the olden days a grain of rice was as big as a gourd. It was cut down with an axe. Then Nang Kho Sop (the soul of rice) became angry at this barbarous treatment and flew away. Since then this feast has been celebrated so that the soul will return."

The reading closes as day breaks, and offerings are made to the bonzes. At the close of the prayer, each one of the faithful, before rising, sprinkles a few drops of water on the ground so that Nang Thorani may bear witness to their alms and so that the goddess may not forget to count it among the merits he has acquired for his future lives.

[69] The owner takes a basket filled with boiled chicken, alcohol, sweet potatoes, and all kinds of tuberous roots. He goes by himself into his rice field and walks over it in every direction, at the same time calling the soul of rice to thank it for having made his fields bear fruit and to beg it to continue being equally generous to him in future years. He offers it all the food in the basket saying: Soul of Rice, here are tuberous roots for thee, here are buds of cabbage palm, and good alcohol made from thy grain. Soul of Rice, descend on us and preside over the feast I am giving in thy honor! 243 527

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leafage, and arrange them in bundles. In the evening everyone returns in a procession to the town, and the wood which has been gathered is put out to dry in the courtyard of the pagoda. A month later, the wood is ready to burn, and another feast takes place at the pagoda. The day before all the women assemble to prepare the offerings of food for the bonzes. They take the wood cut the previous month to cook the ball of rice as big as one's fist on which oil and the contents of an egg are poured so as to form a light surrounding crust. The old people take advantage of this wood- [71] cutting and of its burning to hear additional sermons. The Hit Sip Song Khong Sip Si tell a legend of the origin of this feast, which takes place in memory of an old woman who met a bonze while going to gather wood in the forest. She offered him a ball of rice on which lay an egg. After having done this charitable deed, she was bitten by a snake and died. Since that day the Khao Chi is celebrated.

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[72] ANNUAL RITES OF THE FISHING OF THE PA BEUK

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Every five years the fishing of the pa beuk takes place in five different places. This fish, belonging to the Siluridae family, has a long smooth silvery-white body, without any scales and may attain a weight of 200 kilograms. The five places are Ang (about 25 kilometers upstream from Vientiane) from the 13th to the 15th day of the crescent moon of the 3rd Laotian month, between January and February; at Luang Prabang (in the middle of the river opposite the town) from the 6th to the 7th Laotian months between May and June; at Nong Khieu (about 22 kilometers upstream from Paklay) on the 15th day of the crescent moon of the 3rd Laotian month (February); at Nong Theo (about 30 kilometers upstream from Paklay) between the 4th and 5th Laotian months, without any fixed date; at Ban Seo (about 27 kilometers upstream from Houei Sai) from the 6th to the 7th Laotian month, between May and June.

In the section of the river at Vientiane, as early as the 9th day of the crescent moon, the Chao Muong of the province or his representative leaves the capital to organize the festival. He goes by small stages in a dugout as far as Ang, a sort of wide cove or creek favorable to pa beuk fishing. First the Chao Muong and his retinue stop at Ban Si Khay, "village of the lower orders" ["village de la crasse" may have the above meaning or it may mean "village of filth"--Translator] where lives the village genie who has a wide reputation, and who is continually worshipped by the sorcerers living to the north of the